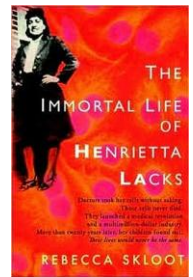


Reading Group Discussion Questions—*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*



1. The passage in which the initial fated cells were removed from Henrietta Lacks's body reads as follows (see page 33):

“With Henrietta unconscious on the operating table in the center of the room, her feet in stirrups, the surgeon on duty, Dr. Lawrence Wharton, Jr., sat on a stool between her legs. He peered inside Henrietta, dilated her cervix, and prepared to treat her tumor. But first – though no one had told Henrietta that TeLinde was collecting samples or asked if she wanted to be a donor – Wharton picked up a sharp knife and shaved two dime-sized pieces of tissue from Henrietta’s cervix: one from her tumor, and one from the healthy cervical tissue nearby. Then he placed the samples in a glass dish.”

Bearing in mind that those two tissue samples removed from Henrietta were *not* removed in an attempt to treat her cancer, but rather purely for purposes of research, was it wrong for the doctor to remove the sample tissue in the first place? Was it wrong for Dr. Gey to collect those samples for the purpose of trying to grow them in controlled conditions? Does the end – i.e., the immeasurable benefit to humankind resulting from those tissue samples – justify the means – i.e., removing tissue from a person without their consent or knowledge?

2. Did you get the impression that Henrietta was treated any differently than a rich, white woman would have been (assuming the hospital was also collecting cell samples)?

3. How do you feel about knowing that you still do not have total control over your body once you go to see a doctor? If you discovered that tissue routinely removed from your body at some point in the past went on to significantly benefit science and research, would you feel that you should somehow be compensated? What do you think is more important – a person’s personal rights over their own tissue, or contributing to science and research for the benefit of all humankind?

4. Was it a good thing for the members of the Lacks family that the author wrote this book? Was this attempt different from previous attempts to write about the Lacks family and Henrietta in particular?

5. Was it hubris, lack of “patient experience,” or frankly, sheer stupidity on the part of the researchers who contacted the family later for blood/DNA samples, to think the family understood what they were doing and why were they doing it?

6. Do you think the family is owed money for the sale of the HeLa cells? Do you agree with their feeling that they should be compensated?

7. Do you think that the attitude among some of the Lacks family members that they should be monetarily compensated for Henrietta’s contribution to science is born out of their poverty and/or oppression based on their race? Do you think if the family were financially comfortable, white, and not the subjects of regular discrimination that their feelings of being owed compensation might be different?

8. How realistic was the characterization, especially of Deborah and Zakariyya? Would you want to meet any of them? Did you like them?

9. When the doctor of the patient, Mr. Moore, lied to him about the financial value of his cells, do you think the doctor behaved unethically, and the court should have ruled against him?

10. What life lessons can be learned from this account?

Rebecca Skloot, Rebecca is the daughter of poet, novelist and essayist Floyd Skloot. She received a BS in biological sciences and an MFA in creative nonfiction. She is a former vice president of the National Book Critics Circle. She is faculty member at the yearly Mid-Atlantic Summer Creative Nonfiction Writers Conference and has taught creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Memphis. She is also a writing mentor with the Creative Nonfiction mentoring program. (From Wikipedia.org)



The Immortal Life is being translated into more than 25 languages and adapted into a young reader edition. It is also being made into an HBO movie produced by Oprah Winfrey and Alan Ball. Skloot is the founder and president of The Henrietta Lacks Foundation, which has been featured in the New York Times. She has a B.S. in biological sciences and an MFA in creative nonfiction. She financed her degrees by working in emergency rooms, neurology labs, veterinary morgues and martini bars. She has taught creative writing and science journalism at the University of Memphis, the University of Pittsburgh, and New York University. She currently gives talks on subjects ranging from bioethics to book proposals at conferences and universities nationwide.

Skloot lives in Chicago but she regularly abandons city life to write in the hills of West Virginia, where she tends to find stray animals and bring them home. She is also an avid knitter, a family tradition passed on from her mother, Betsy McCarthy, a professional knitter whose story was recently featured on Your Life Calling With Jane Pauley.

Skloot has published over 200 featured stories and essays. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, O: The Oprah Magazine, Discover, and New York magazine. Skloot is also a contributing editor at Popular Science and has worked as a correspondent for NPR's Radiolab and PBS's NOVA scienceNOW

Principal Works

Books

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (Crown/Random House, 2010)

Select articles

Henrietta's Dance. Johns Hopkins Magazine. April 2000.

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The Other Baby Experiment. The New York Times. February 22, 2003.

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Taking the Least of You. The New York Times Magazine. April 16, 2006.

Creature Comforts. The New York Times Magazine. December 31, 2008.